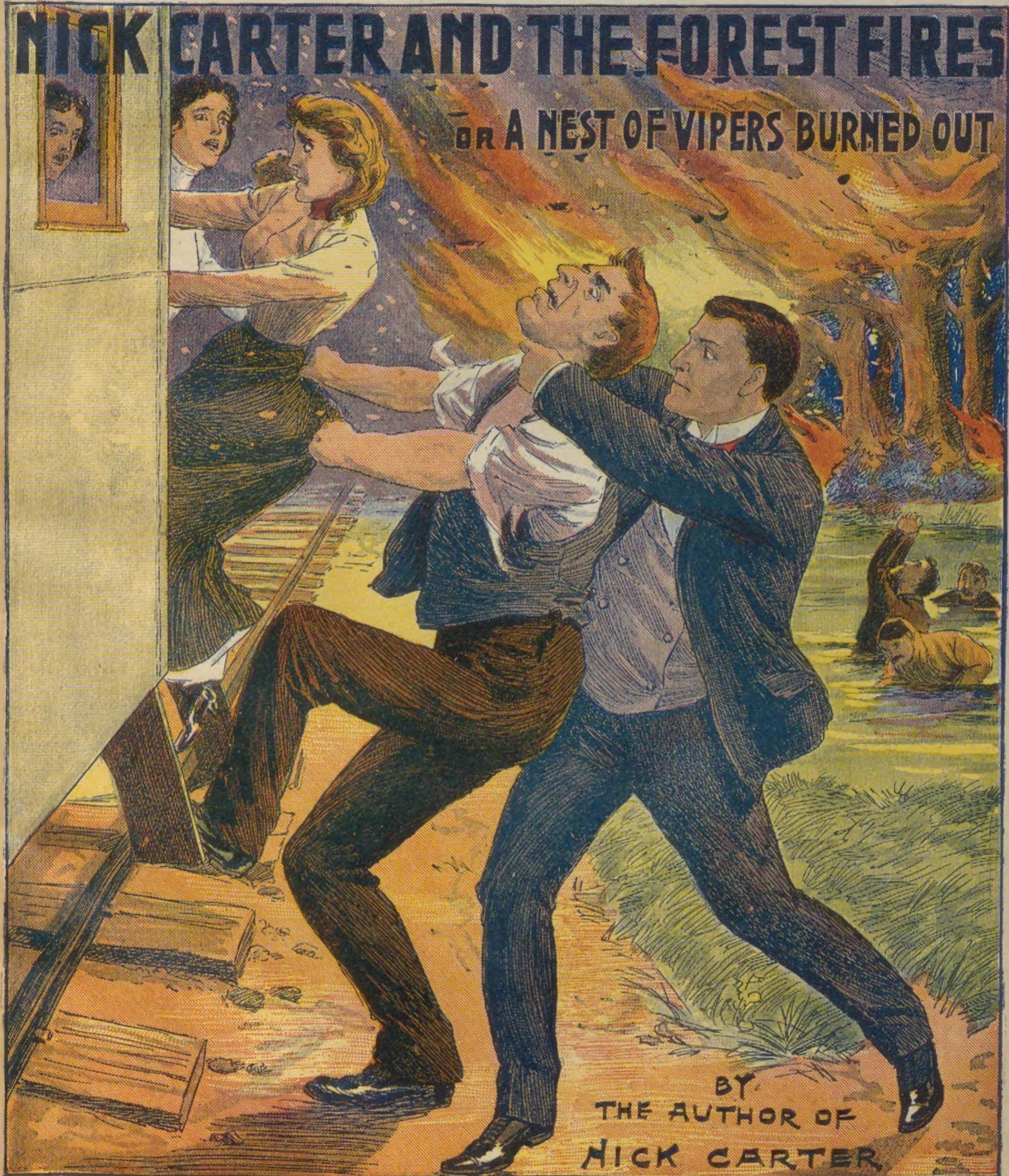


NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued weekly. Subscription price \$2.50 per year. Entered as second class matter at the N. Y. Post Office by STREET & SMITH.

No. 199.

Price 5 Cents.



NICK SEIZED ASH BY THE THROAT AND HURLED HIM AWAY FROM THE RESCUE TRAIN.

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Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1900 by Street & Smith, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress,
Washington, D. C.

Entered as second class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office.
Subscription price, \$2.50 per year.

Issued weekly.

October 20, 1900.

No. 199. STREET & SMITH, Publishers.

NEW YORK.

238 William St., N. Y.

5 Cents.

Nick Carter and the Forest Fires; OR,

A NEST OF VIPERS BURNED OUT.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

HOW JED ASH BROKE JAIL.

"You will find in these papers," said Nick Carter, throwing a small packet on Superintendent Byrnes' desk, "my report of the most exciting and the most dangerous adventure of my life."

The superintendent rose from his chair, and took Nick by the hand. It was the second time he had done so.

"Let us thank God that it's all over, and you're back again, safe and sound," he said. "I knew from the brief messages that you were able to get through by wire that the condition of things out there was something dreadful. There was just one day when I thought you gone."

"So did I," said Nick, smiling, "but never mind that now. You will find the whole story there. I will see you to-morrow when you've had leisure to read it."

"It won't take me till to-morrow," said the superintendent. "I'll read it right now, and the President of the United States can't get in here till I get through."

Nick, with a brief good-by, left the room, and the superintendent turned at once to the persual of the document, which bore this simple title:

"THE CASE OF JED ASH."

"You will remember the circumstances of our interview of August 25th. You then placed in my hands the case of Jed Ash, and upon that case I now make my formal report."

"It seems to me to be of so extraordinary a nature as to justify me in putting it in the form of a detailed narrative, instead of reporting orally, as has been my custom."

"Ash's crime was of course commonplace in the catalogue of murder. He was certainly guilty of the death of Helen Morris.

"Only the meanness and the atrocity of the crime raised it above the ordinary."

"She was a woman not really criminal by nature. She loved this monster, and was true to him through everything. He stabbed her to the heart in their room, because she would not betray her own brother to certain death at Ash's hand."

"These facts are well known, not only to you, but to the public. I merely state them here to make this report complete."

"Ash fled from the city, and for more than two years all efforts to locate him failed."

"On that day which I have mentioned, you informed me that he had been found. He was a prisoner in the town of Freedom, county seat of Marion County, Minn."

"You had learned by correspondence with the legal authorities of that county his term of imprisonment. They had insisted upon their legal right to hold him until the time when his sentence expired."

"They were then willing to deliver him to you, and you were particularly anxious to secure him."

"Thus far the case seemed of the most ordinary character, and one would have said that the duty of bringing Ash back could have been performed by any policeman."

"But at this point the case ceased to be ordinary. As presented by you to me, it was certainly very perplexing, and justified the sending of an experienced man to that town."

"You told me that this little place, of which scarcely anybody ever heard, had given you more trouble in the last five years than any other town or city in the United States."

"No less than twelve criminals of note who had escaped from the city of New York had

been discovered in that town, and not one of them had ever been returned to New York."

"Six had escaped from prison immediately before the arrival of your officers, and had never been found. Four had been rescued by unknown persons from the custody of your officers, and two had been re-arrested in the town and were held in custody by legal means in spite of your demand for them."

"The case of the four rescues had cost the lives of two officers. With such a record, it would certainly seem that the town was worth investigating, especially if it held so desperate a criminal as Jed Ash."

"Your own investigations had been conducted at great disadvantage, and had revealed nothing except the fact that the officers of the law and of the town and county government in Freedom seemed to be men of high character and ability."

"They expressed sorrow for the occurrences that had given you annoyance, and made out a good case to show that there had been no negligence on their part, but that they, like you, had been victims of circumstances, and of shrewd and desperate criminals."

"You requested me to investigate, and, whatever I learned, to bring back Jed Ash, dead or alive."

"I am compelled to report the failure of a part of my mission."

"I started immediately for Freedom, and traveled with all haste, except that I stopped long enough in Chicago to communicate with my assistant, Chick, who was engaged in criminal investigation in that city."

"I then proceeded, and on the evening of August 27th I found myself on the St. Paul

and Duluth Railroad, rapidly approaching Freedom, which is situated on that line.

"I had made inquiries regarding the town from persons on the train. My principal source of information, however, was a commercial traveler, who seemed to be in possession of certain important facts and to be more willing than others to communicate them.

"He said that Freedom was one of the finest towns in the Northwest. It contained many fine residences and public buildings, although it had grown up like a mushroom.

"It was started with a sudden boom about ten years ago by a considerable number of persons who arrived in a body and took up land there.

"Two years later it became the county seat. It was supposed to be the richest town in the county, and it possessed a political influence which was something enormous, considering that its population was less than a thousand persons.

"There was only one store in the place, and so far as he knew, no drummer had ever made a sale in the town. It was known to drummers all along the line, and they never went there. Why that was, he couldn't say. It was a fine store, and carried a great line of goods, according to report. Who sold the goods to the store was a mystery which neither he nor any commercial traveler had ever been able to solve.

"The town did not grow. New settlers were not well received there. It was said that several men had started in business in the town and had remained there as long as they could stand it without making a single sale.

"A man had started a dry-goods store, for instance, and had not sold so much as a spool of thread in six months. Then he quit.

"I asked him about the public buildings and the residences, and we finally spoke of the jail, where the object of my pursuit was confined. He said it was a handsome building of stone, which looked strong enough to be a fort. I told him that several people had escaped from it; in fact, that escapes seemed to be quite common, and he said he didn't see how it could be possible.

"Then I asked about the residence of Judge Richards. It would of course be necessary for me to have an interview with the judge, as the highest legal officer in the district, and I wished to be able to find his house without making inquiries.

"He said I could not mistake it, for it was the handsomest house in town. It was notable for having one of the gable ends completely covered with some climbing vine.

"In view of what I learned about the lack of cordiality to strangers on the part of the residents of Freedom, I decided not to enter the town openly. I learned from the drummer, who had been over the road a great many times, that there was a small station—a sort of milk depot—two or three miles beyond Freedom, where the accommodation trains, such as that upon which we were riding, almost always stop.

"This train did stop there, and I left it. It was dark when I reached Freedom. I took a look at the place as well as I was able, and found it a neat little town with good streets, fairly well lighted.

"The jail seemed to justify the commercial traveler's opinion. In spite of Jed Ash's desperate character, I did not believe that he could break out of such a stronghold.

"I skirted its wall, which was more than ten feet high, and finally came to a spot in the rear where my attention was suddenly attracted by voices which seemed to come from the inclosure.

"I halted and crouched down in the shadow of the wall. No sooner had I done so than a heavy gate was swung open, and the form of a man appeared.

"He was visible in the faint light which streamed out through the gate, and I saw with considerable surprise that the man was Jed Ash.

"He had broken jail at a most opportune moment.

"While I was debating whether to arrest him, I perceived another figure in the doorway. It was that of a man of middle age, clothed in a blue uniform and wearing a cap like an officer's.

"It was perfectly easy to see that he was one of the prison officials. He leaned against the gate-post, and calmly watched the escaping prisoner.

"Mr. Ash took a cigar-case out of his pocket, calmly selected a weed, and handed one to the prison official. He then lit his own and passed the match to the gentleman in uniform.

"I have seen a large number of escaping prisoners in my life, but I have never seen any other conduct himself in so leisurely a manner."

"Mr. Ash was not at all in a hurry.

"He remarked to the gentleman in uni-

form—who, I subsequently learned was the warden of the prison—that it was a very fine evening, although somewhat too smoky.

"The warden said that the weather was satisfactory to him, except for the drought, which permitted the forest fires to gain dangerous headway in various part of the State.

"Having thus expressed himself, the warden yawned, said 'Good-night, Jed,' and closed the door.

"Mr. Ash blew a fragrant cloud of smoke in my direction and turned and walked away."

CHAPTER II.

A HEARING BEFORE JUDGE RICHARDS.

"I took the liberty of following Mr. Ash. He walked at a quick pace, which presently brought him to a handsome residence, at least it gave me that impression, though the night was so dark.

"Certainly I was able to distinguish a heavy growth of some climbing vine on the gable end which was turned toward me. It was the residence of Judge Richards.

"Now, presumably, Judge Richards was the man who sentenced Ash, and when a criminal, just escaped from prison, calls upon the judge who sentenced him, he generally does it for the purpose of committing murder.

"My brief acquaintance with the manners and customs of the town of Freedom, however, led me to doubt whether Mr. Ash had called upon the judge for motives of revenge. At any rate, I did not feel called upon to interfere.

"Ash rang the bell and was admitted. Almost immediately I saw a light shine out

through the curtain of the room in one corner of the house. Evidently that was the room to which Mr. Ash had been shown.

"It had originally been my intention to call upon Judge Richards myself, but I decided that that particular moment was not the right one.

"I was anxious to be present at their interview, but not in the character of a detective.

"For some minutes I stood under one of the windows. The faintest possible murmur of voices was audible. It was evident that I could not overhear what was said.

"At the moment when I so decided, I noticed beside me, in the foundation of the house, a square opening covered with a wire grating. This I knew to be the opening of what is called the cold-air box of a furnace.

"I noiselessly tore away the wire grating, and crawled into the box. There was a sliding door in one side of it, as is customary, and through that I gained access to the cellar. It did not take me long to locate the pipe which, in winter, conveyed hot air to the room in which Ash and the judge, as I believed, were then in conference.

"I succeeded, after a good deal of trouble, in detaching the metal pipe, after which I built a mound of wood in the cellar, and was able to get my ear just under the register.

"It would serve you right," the judge was saying, "if the society furnished you with the means of escaping from this town and did nothing else for you."

"You think so?" said Ash, in that harsh and unnatural tone which fits so admirably with his misshapen but powerful frame.

"I do," replied the judge. "I think it would be liberal. None of us here can claim

to be any too good, but few of us are such abandoned and brutal rascals as yourself. The murder of a defenseless woman, Jed Ash, is no more to my liking than it is to that of the best man alive."

"Go on, Richards," said Ash, "you interest me. I would not have supposed that anything was too good for the man who——"

"Shut up!" yelled Richards, fiercely, and I knew that he had the other by the throat.

"In a second I heard another sound, which showed me that Ash had shaken him off. The strength of that man, deformed as he is, with his right shoulder and his right hip at least two inches higher than the left, is something gigantic.

"I won't rake up the old times, if you don't like it, judge," said Ash. "This is a business matter, and we can't afford to waste time."

"I am a member of this association. You guarantee to protect me to the best of your ability.

"That's what this town was built for. It's a refuge. It's Freedom to many a man hard pressed."

"It has been so to me. I like it, and I mean to make the most of it."

"You can't throw me down. I know everything. I'm one of the original founders of this society."

"You didn't have Helen Morris' blood on your hands then," said Richards, with a shudder.

"No, but there was blood on many a hand that was clasped in yours when the compact was made that bound us all together. Whether there was any on yours or not, who knows? We'll let that pass."

"But my blood sha'n't be on it. You're not going to take my life by giving me up to the officers of the law."

"The society has had information that one of Byrnes' men is on his way out here now. He ought to be here to-morrow, at least."

"Now, what are you going to do for me? Can you hold me legally, or shall I be hidden? That's what I want to know."

"There was a noise which was like a sigh. It was easy to tell that Richards despised the villain before him, and would have escaped from the compact which bound them together if there had been any possibility of doing it."

"There will be a meeting here to-night," he said. "The others must decide. I will not take it upon myself."

"For some time there was silence in the room, and then two more men entered. One of them, I soon learned, was District Attorney Essex, with whom you have been in correspondence. It surprised me considerably to recognize the voice of Mr. Essex."

"He is Lawyer James Foley, sought for by detectives all over the world for the embezzlement of trust funds from the Beekman Estate in New York."

"The other man seemed to be the mayor of the town, which has a government very much like that of a city, although it does not claim the title. The mayor is Austin Holland, called 'The Penman.' I need not introduce Mr. Holland further to you. The story of his forgeries is quite familiar."

"I had never seen a town that promised so well on short acquaintance as Freedom. I had not struck an honest man up to date. Several other men arrived within a few min-

utes. You will find their names in the memorandum accompanying this report. For reasons which will appear later, it is not necessary to refer to them at length here."

"All but two of them were known criminals, and the two evidently must have been members of the mysterious army of the undetected."

"They conferred upon the case of Jed Ash, and I record, in justice to them, that they decided to help that red-handed ruffian for no other reason than because they couldn't help it. He knew all their secrets, and he had them at his mercy."

"It was decided, however, that Ash should not remain in Freedom. Where he was to go I could not learn. The word was written; it was not spoken."

"It was further decided that his route in reaching the second place of safety should be prepared by Judge Richards in writing that evening, and should be given to Ash in prison on the following morning."

"In the evening of the next day, Ash was to escape. Having arrived at this decision, the meeting adjourned."

"Ash went back to jail. I did not think it necessary to follow him, as there seemed to be no doubt whatever that he would go there."

"I preferred to remain in the house and obtain, if possible, a sight of the memorandum to be prepared by the judge."

"After the others had gone, he remained alone in the room, which was his library. It was more than an hour before I saw the light vanish from the grating over my head."

"Then I heard his steps as he left the room. I waited perhaps ten minutes. Then, as all

was quiet above me, I lifted the register out of its position and crawled through the opening.

"Throwing the light of my lantern around the room, I made it out to be a spacious and comfortably furnished apartment.

"In one corner stood a large desk. It was evident to me that Judge Richards had sat at that desk while talking. It required hard work to examine its many locked drawers and its spacious pigeon-holes. The result was very discouraging. The judge was a prudent man. His documents, so far as I could discover, would all bear rigid examination. He sticks to the form of law, even if he works forever in the interests of criminals.

"At last, however, I came upon a secret drawer. It contained nothing but the memorandum which was to be given to Ash.

"This was in cipher; but the quality of their secret writing is not up to the standard of the rest of their scheme.

"I read it quite easily. It contained directions for Mr. Ash's flight to Australia. He was to receive assistance by the way from a number of men whose names and addresses are also given in the memorandum which I just now referred to.

"It seemed to me that they could easily be taken into custody.

"I closed the secret drawer and was about to leave the house by the way in which I had come, when the door of the library opened and Judge Richards, in dressing gown and slippers, and carrying a lamp in his hand, entered the room.

"He must have been more surprised than I was, although it was rather a facer for me. For a moment he stood still, as if he were an

image especially designed to stand there and hold a lamp.

"His first movement was toward his hip-pocket. He threw back the dressing-gown with great dexterity, and there was a pistol in his hand in a very small fraction of a second. I take it that he must have been long accustomed to go armed at all times.

"But I had been watching him very closely, and I had a pistol out just a shade quicker than he. The door, meanwhile, which he had released, had closed behind him with the draught of air.

"We faced each other in that room. He saw that I had the drop on him, and he did a very shrewd thing.

"With a sort of a loud snort, he let his breath go directly down the chimney of the lamp.

"The next instant we were in total darkness."

CHAPTER III.

THE PRICE OF HIS LIFE.

"The situation was little to my liking.

"It promised a desperate duel in the dark, with victory not much more desirable for me than defeat.

"My position in the view of the law was far from strong. I was in this man's house without warrant. I had neither the right nor the desire to shoot him.

"On the other hand, he had every motive for shooting me. Whether he thought me a thief or guessed my real errand, his course was equally plain.

"The only issue of the contest which could be favorable to me was to make him a prisoner, and such a hope seemed desperate.

"I could not escape. To attempt it would be to make a noise which would certainly bring his fire upon me, and alarm the town.

"In such a case, even if I got out of his house, it would be a long chance that I should escape from Freedom.

"In view of all these difficulties, I did a good lot of hard thinking in the first half minute after Richards blew that lamp out.

"I had, of course, rapidly and noiselessly changed my position. No doubt he had done the same.

"Neither of us knew where the other was, and each believed that to fire by guesswork would be to bring an answering and probably fatal shot.

"Therein lay my safety. He had nothing to fear from an alarm, except a bullet from my pistol.

"If he had not been in fear of that, he would have instantly raised an uproar.

"As it was, he was as strongly compelled to a policy of silence as was I.

"The only difference was that he could wait longer than I could. The accidental entrance of some other person or the coming of daylight was a danger to him, no doubt, but it was a sure thing for me.

"I might, indeed, get the better of him, but I couldn't fight the whole town.

"I listened intently, but there was no sound. It did not seem possible that he had escaped from the room by some secret way. I was certain that he had not moved since his quick change of position following the disappearance of the light.

"It was necessary to take chances. I could not work down upon him in the dark. I must have light.

"I lay upon the floor a little to one side of his desk.

"Close by my hand was the chair which he used when he wrote.

"It was an ordinary office chair, revolving on a central screw which raised or lowered it.

"I still had my lantern, which I had completely darkened at the first alarm.

"Taking a long cord from my pocket, I fastened the lantern to the side of the desk.

"Its covered lens pointed in the direction in which my adversary lay, or, at least, toward that corner of the room.

"You may remember that my lantern is so arranged that the pressing of a button turns on the current, and at the same time uncovers the lens.

"I fastened an end of the cord in a slip-knot around the lantern. The noose passed over the button, and was held in place by a groove which is cut in the button's center.

"The other end of the cord I fastened very tightly around the screw under that chair, giving the line about a yard of slack.

"Then I suddenly spun the chair around violently on its axis.

"Under cover of the noise which it made I crept rapidly to one side, approaching my man as I did so.

"The cord was wound up on the screw as on a pulley.

"The noose tightened. It pressed upon the button, opened the lamp, and sent its bright ray flashing across the room.

"Richards, I am sure, had been on the point of firing the instant that the noise of the chair gave him a clew of my location.

"But he hesitated, rightly judging that this was a ruse.

"Thus he waited, crouched upon the floor, with his revolver ready. He could not guess what was coming.

"Then the light from the lantern suddenly flashed right into his eyes, for I had aimed it well.

"Dazzled and surprised, he fired on the instant and by guess work.

"Before he could repeat the shot, I was upon him. I wrested the revolver from his hand, and in another second had the iron bracelets on his wrists.

"I set him on his feet, and he looked eagerly into my face.

"His own was pale, and he showed that peculiar weakness which afflicts the criminal who has long avoided arrest, but at last finds the grip of the law upon him.

"Many a night, no doubt, he had dreamed of such a scene, and had started out of sleep with the cold clasp of the handcuffs still lingering upon his wrists.

"The evidence of that long apprehension was in his first words:

"'Are you from Byrnes?'

"'I am,' was the reply, 'and I intend to take you back with me.'

"You will bear in mind that I had not the least idea what crime this man had committed.

"His face is not known to the officers of the law. Whatever job he has done has been so cleverly managed that no suspicion has rested on him.

"But with the constant terror of the criminal, he imagined that he was detected.

"I had the evidence of Jed Ash's smothered accusation, and no more, except that I knew that Richards, as a leader of banded

criminals in that strange community, must have a record reaching back beyond the date of its foundation.

"Richards was rapidly recovering. The first shock had passed away, and the man's courage, tact and knowledge of the law were coming to his rescue.

"'Let me see your warrant,' he demanded.

"Of course, he was perfectly right.

"I produced a warrant for the arrest of George Marden, the bank breaker, which I have had in my pocket for about a year.

"He read it as I held it before his face.

"'You know that I am not George Marden,' he said.

"Of course I did, but it was not necessary to say so.

"'I shall arrest you on suspicion of being that man,' said I. 'If you turn out to be somebody else, perhaps I can get a new warrant which will fit the case better.'

"'Very well,' he said. 'I submit to arrest.'

"I saw his game. He knew that he could demand an examination in that town, and be released. The whole machinery of 'justice' in that county was in his hands.

"I had no idea of letting him believe that I was going to make a fight in Freedom, or, indeed, in that part of the State.

"Come with me, then,' I said. 'I have a carriage outside. There's a line of them with fresh horses waiting for me all the way from here to St. Paul. You will be arraigned there.'

"It was a hard blow for him. His crimes hung over him like a cloud. He dared not face investigation anywhere but there.

"He knew well that if I got him into custody outside the circle of his gang's influence

he would be lost. His hidden and guilty past would surely be revealed.

"I could see by the working of his brow how the thought passed rapidly through his mind.

"Then there was a flash in his gray eyes, and I knew what it meant.

"He had resolved upon a desperate resistance.

"'One cry from you,' said I, raising my revolver, 'and I shoot you where you stand. I am well aware that, as things stand now, it is my life or yours.'

"There was a smothered, wailing cry, but not from my prisoner's lips.

"A door opened slowly, as if by the weight of some person who, half fainting, leaned against it.

"A woman entered the room. She was past middle life, and her luxuriant hair was perfectly white, but she was beautiful.

"She found her way to his side, as if groping through darkness, and put her arms around him.

"'It has come at last,' she said, almost in a whisper.

"'It has, indeed,' said I, 'though long delayed.'

"I was, as yet, all at sea upon the case, but it seemed to me that my chances were better for getting a disclosure from the woman than from the man.

"'The pistol shot alarmed me,' she said, after a pause. 'I hurried to this room, and just as I was about to open the door I heard your voices. You said that you had come from Superintendent Byrnes.'

"So I have."

"For my husband?"

"'Madame,' I replied, 'I will state the exact facts to you. I did not come for him expressly.'

"I came to investigate this town, which I now know to be a haunt of criminals. Thus I came by a hint of your husband's grave crime, and it is my duty to take him back to answer for it.'

"A light shone in her eyes..

"'Will that solve the secret of this place?' she asked.

"'It may.'

"'It will not,' she replied, with decision. 'Act as you have intended, and you may, perhaps, put my husband behind prison bars, but the secret of Freedom will escape you.'

"I perceived a chance for a deal.

"You will bear in mind that it would have been next to impossible for me to get him out of the town.

"I might, perhaps, have managed him alone, but now that the woman had appeared upon the scene, my case was nearly hopeless.

"She could raise an alarm that would inevitably cost me my life and free the prisoner.

"Certainly, she would have done so had she not supposed that I was backed by a sufficient force to protect me. My fake story about carrying her husband to St. Paul, of course, suggested that I had many men under my orders.

"'I have no desire to make a victim of your husband,' said I. 'Let him turn State's evidence against the others, and I may be able to keep him out of prison.'

"'I won't do it,' replied Richards, firmly. 'I'll fight it out right here.'

"'If that's your decision,' said I, 'my course

is plain. Come with me. And do not utter a cry, or you are doomed.'

"I seized him and dragged him toward a window.

"It was a desperate game of bluff, but I carried it through. Neither of them dared to raise an alarm.

"I opened the window and spoke in a low voice, as if to some one outside.

"Take care of this man,' said I. 'Put him with the others and rush them out of town within an hour.'

"I lifted him over the window-ledge, and in doing so managed to slip a gag into his mouth.

"It was dark there, for the lantern lit only a single corner of the room. Indeed, it was so dark that I succeeded in securing Richards' legs without his wife perceiving it.

"Then I dropped him out of the window.

"Stop!' cried she. 'If you will spare him I will tell you all that you wish to know.'

"I turned to the window and appeared to give an order. She meanwhile waited in desperate anxiety for my answer.

"Her proposition struck me favorably.. It looked like a good trade.'

"Evidently, it would be impossible to secure any considerable number of convictions among the members of this gang of scoundrels without getting somebody to turn State's evidence.

"So, in any case, one of the gang at least would have to be spared. Why not Richards, as well as another?

"If I refused, the woman, in desperation, might raise an alarm which would result in my death and the temporary defeat of justice in regard to all the gang.

"Circumstances had given me this woman for a witness. She could not be made to testify against her husband. This was an additional reason for sparing him:

"Therefore I gave a pledge..

"If you will tell me all the facts about this town and its criminal inhabitants,' I said, 'I will do everything in my power to secure him against punishment for any crime short of murder. That is, he will get the advantages to be obtained from turning State's evidence.'

"I then told her my real name, and gave her the strongest guarantee that was possible of my intention to carry out my promise.

"You have the name of keeping your word to the letter,' she said. 'I will trust you, and I will tell you everything that I know about the most remarkable association of criminals ever formed in this country. I will do it as the price of his life.'

"His life!" I repeated. 'Then he is a murderer?'

"No, he is not. But he would never endure imprisonment. It would kill him.'

"I believe she was right. My brief view of Richards showed me that he had not long to live, at the farthest, and that a year's imprisonment would probably be a life sentence.

"Another reason for sparing him. He would soon go to his account before the Just Judge."

CHAPTER IV.

A WONDERFUL CRIMINAL SOCIETY.

"You may wonder at my readiness to betray his associates,' she said.

"Indeed, I did, but I did not tell her of it.

"I hate them all,' she continued. 'My

husband, under great provocation, was led to commit one crime. But these men are criminals at heart. They prefer evil.

"He, on the contrary, has been tortured by remorse.. Involved in this thieves' and murderers' league by the influence of others, he has always tried to escape from it, but they would not permit him to do so.

"They have depended upon him. He was forced to be their leader, but, believe me, he has used all his influence to restrain them. His failure and his remorse have preyed upon his mind, and reduced him to the condition in which you see him.

"The League of Safety, as it is called, was organized in New York City ten years ago.

"My husband was then a fugitive from justice and hard pressed.

"He had fallen in with a doctor—a criminal; in fact, a murderer—who was then living in New York under the eyes of the police; but unsuspected.

"This Dr. Bolton, who is now dead, had invented a new system of disguise. I do not know all the secret of it, but it consists in altering the muscles around the eyes by means of a surgical operation.

"The result is an entire change in the expression of the face. It is wonderful. I think that even you would be surprised at what can be accomplished in that way.

"Dr. Bolton performed that operation upon my husband, as he had previously done upon himself.

"When I saw the change that had been wrought I believed that our troubles were at an end. I thought that we could go to some remote city, and there live honestly and happily.

"My husband would gladly have done so. But we reckoned without Dr. Bolton.

"He had other plans. The idea of the League of Safety had entered his brain, and he was determined that my husband should join in the undertaking.

"How could my husband avoid doing so? He was wholly in the doctor's power. One word from Bolton would have sent him to prison.

"That villain Bolton was without soul or conscience. I remember the voice in which he said to my husband: "You have the heart of an honest man but the head of a criminal. You are too smart to be straight."

"He forced my husband into the leadership of the scheme.

"The idea was to found a town which would be a refuge for criminals belonging to the league.

"It was also to be a depot for the plunder of thieves, and for years it has been. Vast treasure lies hidden here at this moment, and—she lowered her voice as she uttered the words—"when you have saved my husband you shall know the hiding place.

"I am almost the only woman here who knows. There are a few others. They are active in the criminal affairs of the community.

"But most of the women here have never committed crime. They are here because nothing could separate them from the men they loved. Some, indeed, strange as it seems to me, are entirely ignorant of the character of the place.

"Well, to continue my story. A band of criminals was quickly collected in New York from among those who were in hiding there.

"Upon them Dr. Bolton worked the miracle of his surgery. Those who were not indelibly marked by nature were effectually disguised.

"In a year the band numbered over three hundred. Then they came here and founded this town.

"They were a superior set of men, mentally. They soon attained a great influence in the affairs of the county.

"As the place was a sort of thieves' treasury, it was rich. The lower sort of criminals were never admitted to the league. Not pick-pockets, but men who could rob banks, were wanted.

"There are a number of expert jewelry thieves here. Two of the women criminals are of this class.

"Having founded the town, the leaders among the men immediately began to secure political influence in the county. Money can buy that, and there was plenty of money here.

"In a few years Freedom became the county seat, by political corruption bought with stolen funds.

"The important county offices—all the offices, in fact—were given to members of the gang. My husband was made a judge.

"He holds a special judicial office which was practically created for him by the influence and money of this extraordinary band of criminals.

"The nature of this office permits him to reside here always, and to control the judicial affairs of the county. He is a shrewd lawyer, and he has escaped attack by any newspaper.

"He has always confided absolutely in me, and has never hidden any of the secret workings of the society."

"Her voice broke as she said these words. Evidently it was a terrible thing for her to betray these secrets.

"It was easy to see that she did it in sheer desperation, believing that inevitable ruin had come upon the criminal society at last, and that the only chance for her husband to break away from his associates and spend his last years in peace was through my help.

"Their scheme," she continued, "will be readily understood by you. It was to arrest and imprison any of their own band who were too hotly pursued.

"Convicted here of any crime that could be invented to fit the emergency, these men could not be taken away by any process of law to answer for their real crimes elsewhere.

"They lived in luxury in the jail; were allowed to come out at night and spend their time as they pleased; and, in general, were like the guests at a hotel.

"When the State prison inspectors came, the penitentiary was a model of good order and stern discipline. It has been described in the newspapers as the finest penal institution in the world. What a hideous joke!

"Crimes were plotted within it; and its warden is a man who has been guilty of almost every crime in the calendar.

"Prisoners who were relentlessly pursued by the authorities of other cities, so that it was known that detectives would be waiting for them on the expiration of their sentences, were allowed to escape. There was a regular system of agents in various cities, by whom these escaping prisoners could be helped to remote quarters of the globe.

"During Dr. Bolton's life this was rarely

necessary. The number of prisoners was small.

"Criminals who fled to this refuge were disguised by his wonderful processes so that they could go anywhere without fear."

"But after his death the legal game of arrest and detention had to be constantly played, and so shrewdly has it been done that not a member of the society has ever paid the penalty of his crime."

"Now you know all. Your shrewdness will enable you to grasp the details which I have passed over."

"I feel that retribution is close upon these miscreants. You do not believe in presentiment, but I tell you that in the last few days I have had certain knowledge that this whole terrible band, the strongest and most successful organization of criminals ever formed, was near, very near, to its total ruin and extinction."

"As she said this, she looked like a prophetess mysteriously inspired."

"I felt that these disclosures were providential. To hold the whole scheme of the league thus in my hand was to make victory sure—so I thought—and to bring down the doom she predicted."

"The result has proved to me once more that we mortals do not know very much about Providence."

"We can look back and see what it has done, but we can't look ahead and tell what it is going to do."

"I trusted the woman completely. Her sincerity was perfectly evident."

"Our agreement holds," said I to her. "I will save your husband if you will faithfully follow my instructions."

"She promised most solemnly to do so."

"This memorandum," said I, handing her the paper which I had found in her husband's desk, "must be given to the warden to-morrow."

"It contains the schedule of Jed Ash's route after he leaves this town."

"You must tell the warden that your husband has been suddenly called away from the town. You will know what excuse to give."

"She nodded confidently. I saw that she had no doubt of her ability to hoodwink the warden."

"I shall take your husband out of this town, but I shall not take him to St. Paul," I continued.

"To make everything look more plausible I shall use a horse and carriage from his stable."

"Good," she said. "I will say that he was summoned in the night and rode away."

"At this point I was in a quandary.

"I didn't know what to do with Richards."

"Of course, I couldn't take him to any near-by town. He would be recognized. His power extended for miles on either side, and the local authorities in many of the surrounding towns were his slaves."

"I did not want to take him out into the woods and tie him to a tree. That would be barbarous. I might meet with an accident immediately afterward and leave him there to starve or die of exposure."

"If I had known of any hut in the woods I would have taken him there and bound him, with food and water within his reach. I knew of no such place, though I did not doubt that hunters' cabins were scattered about in

the forest, and of course I could not find one in the night.

"It occurred to me that perhaps she might know of some such place. I resolved to trust her even to that extent.

"Mrs. Richards," said I, "it is my intention to convey your husband to a cabin in the woods and there confine him under the guard of my men.

"I shall leave my entire force there; I shall not bring them into town to-morrow; perhaps not for several days."

"Do you know where a cabin is situated—some hunter's lodge—in which your husband can have something like comfort during his brief imprisonment?"

"She flushed with pleasure, but I saw no sign of treachery.

"Yes, I know such a place," she said.

"And she proceeded to describe it minutely. It seems that she had been there with her husband.

"It was evidently just the place I wanted. Her description of the route left nothing to be desired.

"I made her repeat my instructions to her and then told her to go to her room.

"She begged to be allowed to say good-by to her husband, but I was forced to deny her request. I could not let her see that there was no guard over him.

"I made the excuse that if she was taken to him some alarm might be given. At last she obeyed my order and left the room.

"I removed all traces of my visit—which necessitated my going to the cellar—and at last I went to where Richards lay on the ground under the window.

"He had rolled down a little bank, and lay

at some distance from the house, which was probably fortunate, as he was making considerable noise, despite his gag.

"I loosened the fastenings on his legs and made him walk to the stable. There I secured a good horse and a light top buggy without any trouble. We got out of the town without meeting anybody.

"You will readily understand that my mind had been far from easy during these later hours.

"I had placed a tremendous confidence in Mrs. Richards. If she had taken it into her head to betray me, my life would not have been worth much.

"However, there was no sign of any treachery on her part, and I was much encouraged, for it was evident that if she had been playing a game with me she would not have let me get out of town with her husband."

CHAPTER V.

THE LUCK TURNS.

"When we were well clear of the town I took the gag out of Richards' mouth.

"It took some time to get his tongue in working order after that, but when he did he made up for lost time.

"He asked me more questions than two good liars could have answered.

"I told him a part of what I had learned from his wife, and of my promise to her.

"He did not display the gratitude which I felt that my leniency to him had deserved.

"In short, he was inclined to be ugly, although he was powerless.

"Richards was a hard man to understand. I do not doubt that there were times when he

felt, the remorse of which his wife had spoken, but I am perfectly sure that there were other times when he was the most dangerous of crooks—the brainy crook, the man with a mind of tremendous power and subtlety turned to the purposes of evil.

"He exhausted his vast ingenuity in attempts to bribe me, and, failing in that, he sprang endless tricks upon me.

"He urged me to take him to all sorts of places, in any one of which, I do not doubt, secret destruction was waiting for me."

"I held on my course, and before daybreak landed him in the cabin.

"I think I forgot to say that Mrs. Richards had given me a supply of food. There was a spring near the hut, and this, though almost dry from the long drought, supplied sufficient water for his needs.

"There was a stout young tree which had been allowed to stand right in the middle of the cabin, as a sort of center-pole.

"I put my handcuffs on his ankles, with the chain around the tree.

"The food and water I placed within his reach.

"When I left him I felt reasonably sure that he was safe. He might howl all he pleased in that vast wilderness. There was not one chance in forty million that anybody would hear him."

"I drove by a wood road, described to me by Mrs. Richards, to the town of Hendricks, where I left the horse in charge of a farmer, having previously discovered that he did not recognize the judge's animal.

"Then I made the best of my way to a telegraph office, and sent a cipher message to

Chick and Patsy, who, I knew, would be by that time in St. Paul.

"I told them to come on as quickly as possible, and to get three or four good men—fighting men—from the force in that city.

"I hung around that town nearly all day, because I did not dare to go back to Freedom in daylight.

"Every stranger was so closely scrutinized that no disguise was of much account. It made little difference what a man looked like there; he was watched.

"But along in the afternoon I got what seemed to me a bright idea. I remembered a pal of Jed Ash's, whom I happened to have seen in New York on the day before I left.

"Martin Queens, alias Walsh, alias pretty nearly every other name in the directory, is the man. You remember him, of course. He is the fellow who shot the top of Chinese Charley's ear off in a fan-tan joint in the Bend a couple of years ago.

"I judged that if Ash was in the gang Queens was pretty likely to be in it also.

"The fellow is about my build, and I thought that I should have little trouble in personating him, as I know very nearly as much about his history as he does himself.

"So, as Martin Queens, I arrived in Freedom by train just before dark.

"In the railroad yard I saw Chick and his force. They had come up to Freedom with an engine and caboose.

"Chick was the engineer, Patsy was the fireman and his men were Italian laborers.

"I don't see how even Chick himself could have done better than that. It was just the game to fit the case. The railroad was the

one thing that those rascals couldn't absolutely control.

"Of course, the engine had opportunely broken down just as they reached Freedom. Trust Chick for that.

"I communicated with him by signs as I stood for a minute on the station platform.

"My instructions were simply to wait.

"Then I went up into the town, intending to take a look around, and finally to have an interview with Mrs. Richards.

"There is only one barroom in Freedom, and it is an elegant place, lighted by electricity and garnished with fine paintings.

"I walked in and lounged up to the bar.

"There were more than twenty men in the place, and nearly all of them seemed to know me.

"They greeted me in a very commonplace way, as if my coming was the most natural thing in the world.

"I was not bothered by secret signs or passwords, as I had thought possible.

"In fact, their greeting was of such a nature that it alarmed me. I saw mischief in it.

"Very guardedly I led the conversation around in the way I wanted it to go, and I discovered something that would have been a good excuse for cold shivers down my spine.

"Martin Queens had arrived in the town that morning.

"It did not require a lightning calculator to figure out that I had only a few moments to linger.

"That barroom was not a safe place for me. Martin Queens might come in at any instant.

"When I thought of that possibility I began to smell gunpowder.

"Somebody opened a bottle of champagne—they don't drink anything but champagne in Freedom, I should judge—and I couldn't get away without drinking a glassful of it.

"Then I made the best excuse that I could think of and broke loose from the party.

"At the door I met Queens face to face.

"I was prepared for it. The luck had turned, and I knew it.

"When it gets to running that way nothing can stop it, and the only thing to do is to expect the worst. I have never yet been disappointed on such occasions.

"Queens gave one look at me and went for his gun.

"He is a shrewd fellow, and he saw through the game in an instant.

"Some of the others saw us facing each other, and they 'tumbled,' too.

"Remember that there had been rumors in the air, and it didn't take much to put the gang on to anything of that kind.

"A man from you, Superintendent, had been expected in Ash's case, and everybody was looking for him in any possible shape.

"In fact, Martin Queens himself had brought news of my departure from New York. How he got it is a mystery that will be worth investigating.

"That was one of the reasons why he had come out there so suddenly.

"Well, when he reached for his gun I hit him under the left ear, and he lay down in the middle of the floor.

"His pistol flew out of his hand and went up among the bottles in the rack back of the bar, where it went off with a noise like two large cannons.

"I made a dive for the swinging doors through which Queens had entered.

"Three men were just coming in, and they blocked me."

"Before I could get by them a half-dozen pistols went off behind me.

"I was touched twice, but very lightly.

"Strangely enough, two of the three men who were coming in were dropped in their tracks by chance shots.

"I dropped the other one with my fist.

"Then I went down quickly myself, while two or three bullets went over my head.

"I came up with the dead body of one of the men who had been shot, and, holding it in front of me, I backed out of the place.

"The body was hit twice before I got out.

"Once on the outside; I made a hard run for it.

"The crowd was on my heels.

"But the darkness was in my favor.

"It had come on dark suddenly. The smoke of the great forest fires burning in the pine woods in a neighboring county had hung over the town for many days like a pall.

"At the approach of night this cloud seemed to settle down. It was thick and dark and of a pungent odor.

"I thanked God for the shadow of this vast vapor from the giant torches of the forest, blazing on a hundred hills. It shielded me as I ran.

"I doubled on my pursuers, and soon had them completely off the track.

"Then I paused, changed my disguise, and cautiously made my way toward Judge Richards' house."

CHAPTER VI.

TRAPPED.

"I had made a plan to fit this emergency.

"It had seemed probable that I should need to be concealed, and I had arranged with Mrs. Richards for hiding in her house.

"We also had an agreement regarding signals, in case I wished an interview with her.

"She responded promptly to my signal, and admitted me secretly into the judge's library, where my previous interview with her had occurred.

"I told her of my adventure, because it seemed necessary to prepare her for anything that might happen.

"She was greatly alarmed, but she stuck to her agreement. She had quietly prepared for secreting me in the house, and she was ready to take the risk.

"Of course I might have sought refuge with Chick and his force, but I did not wish to embarrass his action, or to run any chance of throwing suspicion upon him.

"Mrs. Richards made her report to me regarding the case of Ash.

"She had carried the memorandum regarding his route to the warden of the prison, and he had not questioned her story about the judge.

"It had been decided, however, to vary the plan of Ash's escape.

"He was not to leave until the following morning.

"Just before daybreak there was to be an escape from the prison. Half a dozen other crooks were going to leave town with Ash.

"The gang was taking alarm, and had decided that it was prudent to remove several

of its worst members to other parts of the world.

"They didn't want to go—at least some of them didn't—but it was a case of risking a few for the general good, and their oaths, as well as their necessities, forced them to yield.

"In view of these facts, it seemed to me best to put Chick in possession of the necessary information and have him quietly follow the gang out of town to a spot where they could be safely captured.

"I remained in Mrs. Richards' house till about two o'clock in the morning, and then crept out to make a call on Chick.

"The town was very lively that night—much too lively for my comfort.

"A very spirited search for me was in progress, and I had to exercise the extremest caution in order to avoid men who patrolled the streets.

"At last I worked my way to the railroad track, and found the caboose in which Chick's party was quartered.

"They were five in all, and were keeping watch with military precision.

"I encountered Patsy on guard. Chick and the others were asleep in the car.

"I roused Chick, and we talked over the details of the situation till about four o'clock.

"Then it was time to look out for the escape from the prison.

"We decided that it would not be necessary to watch the prison. I knew the route which the escaping party would take.

"By consultation of maps, we found that the best way to proceed would be to run the engine and car along the track about five miles to a point where Ash and his gang would cross the line of the road.

"From that point the pursuit could be taken up.

"At half-past four there was an alarm at the prison.

"The rascals went through all the formalities. They rang bells and fired pistols just as if they were trying to prevent the escape of the party which, in reality, they were taking leave of with the greatest politeness possible among such miscreants.

"Perhaps their trouble was taken on account of the gang of laborers supposed at that time to be quartered in the caboose behind the disabled engine.

"At any rate, they did it well.

"As soon as we heard the rumpus I jumped off the car. Chick went to the engine and slowly crept out of the town.

"I had decided not to go with him, but to remain on the watch in Freedom.

"With much trouble, I succeeded in getting back to the judge's house, and Mrs. Richards again admitted me.

"She took me at once to the room which she had prepared for me.

"It was never used, she said, but was always locked, and she kept the key.

"I will mention here that the servants in Freedom are the most ignorant foreigners that could be found.

"As soon as they began to learn anything or to understand the English language they were sent away.

"Thus it will be seen that Mrs. Richards had nothing to fear from her two servants.

"They were too stupid to discover anything, and if I kept out of their actual sight I was safe from betrayal.

"Mrs. Richards had made the kindest ar-

rangements for my comfort. I had told her that I might find it necessary to use her house as a refuge for several days until I could mature my plans.

"I slept several hours in that room. About noon Mrs. Richards brought me a nice breakfast, and I was doing it full justice, while conversing with her, when a sudden, alarming noise in the house below startled us both.

"Mrs. Richards opened the door.

"Loud voices could be heard in the lower hall.

"'My husband!' she whispered, and turned pale.

"I thought that she was going to faint, and if she had you would never have received this report from me.

"But she recovered herself.

"'What shall I do?' she said, in a whisper.

"'Go to him at once. Use your own judgment. There's no time for me to instruct you. Whatever you do, don't let him know I'm in the house.'

"She left the room, and I sat down with a revolver in each hand, and prepared to make the best fight I could.

"Nothing happened for several minutes, and I began to feel easier. It was evident that Richards had not guessed at once that I was hidden there.

"The noise became less. I ventured to creep to the door.

"Nobody was in the upper hall or near enough to make me afraid to show myself.

"I leaned over the banister railing, and could hear below me the sound of hurried words spoken by Mrs. Richards.

"'I did it to save your life,' she was saying over and over again.

"'You have ruined me here among the only friends I have,' he said. 'These criminals, as you justly call them, have been my associates. I would not betray them even to save my life.'

"'This detective whom you took into your confidence has no power to protect me. You have sealed my doom.'

"'If he succeeds in his endeavor to break our power here, I shall be the first one to go to prison.'

"'There is but one hope for us. He may be still in this town.'

"'I have learned that he returned. He was seen in disguise last evening.'

"'The fellow must have a charmed life. He dodged a hundred bullets.'

"'If he is still in this town, as I believe, he may be recaptured, and—'

"'And murdered,' said Mrs. Richards. 'Oh, my husband; do not put your hand to this new and awful crime. Rather go to prison.'

"'There is no blood upon your hands now. At worst, you are only the friend and shield of murderers. You have always tried to prevent their violence.'

"'Let us get away from this town. Let us go anywhere—'

"Richards interrupted her fiercely.

"'Go away? How? Can we escape ourselves?'

"'Certainly not; and I would not go if I could. I will stay with my comrades.'

"'This man deserves no consideration at my hands. He treated me like a dog.'

"'I've been chained in my cabin in the woods. I might have died there if, by mere chance, a passing hunter had not heard my yells as he passed.'

"I lay gagged and bound under my own window last night while he cunningly played upon your fears and got our secrets out of you."

"Why should he bind and gag you? Were you not guarded by his men?"

"His men? He has no men here. He is working alone. If you had raised one cry that night we should all be safe to-day."

"I did not like the tenor of the conversation."

"When he showed her that I had not been quite so frank and confidential as she thought that I had he played his strongest card."

"I fancied that she wavered and was half disposed to betray me."

"But she was a better and a stronger woman than I, at that moment, gave her credit for being."

"The thought of the certain death which awaited me if she gave me up, and her dread of that murder, made her true to me."

"But she made an almost fatal error."

"I will not let you kill him!" she cried.

"Then you know where he is!" exclaimed he.

"She was silent."

"This is almighty serious, Bill," another voice broke in.

"I recognized the tones of Foley, alias Essex, district attorney."

"He had evidently entered from another room, and had taken Mr. and Mrs. Richards by surprise."

"There seemed to be several other men with Foley."

"I judged that they had come to the house with Richards and that he had left them in

his library while he held a private interview with his wife on the floor above.

"They had become suspicious, and had followed him to learn what was going on."

"Your wife knows where this man is," continued Foley. "I've heard enough to see very clearly that she has sold us out. You know what the rules of the society say on that point."

"I could tell by his tone that he hated Mrs. Richards. It was easy to guess that this woman, so much superior to her surroundings, had held herself aloof from the criminal companions of her husband, and had made them her enemies."

"This was their hour of vengeance."

"No harm shall come to her," thundered Richards.

"Perhaps not," said Foley; "but I think you'll admit that she is no longer to be trusted."

"What then?"

"She must be put under some restraint."

"Never!"

"You will yield to the wishes of the Committee of Safety."

"That appeared to be the name by which the leaders of this infamous gang designated themselves."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," retorted Richards.

"You'll have to, Bill."

"Foley, you know me better. Why do we waste time here. This man must be caught."

"How?"

"He has not left town by rail. If he isn't here, he must have taken to the woods. He can be hunted down."

"Perhaps so. At any rate, it's worth try-

ing. I'm willing to try it first, but I insist that Mrs. Richards shall be kept under guard, so that she may have no opportunity to communicate with him.'

"I will be responsible for her."

"That won't do. Let her be put under guard in this house, if you will, but watched she must be. I'll have Kate and three or four sure women do it; if she's too superior to have men for her jailers."

"Let him do as he wishes," said Mrs. Richards, with dignity.

"So Foley had his way. The women were summoned, and Mrs. Richards was put in their charge in her own room.

"And now for the search," said Foley. "The first thing to do is plain."

"What's that?" asked Richards.

"To search this house!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE LAST CARTRIDGE.

"It was time for desperate action.

"If I remained in the house I could not escape discovery. I might fight my way out through the party below me, but that would simply mean death upon the street."

"There was no help but in some unique deception, some trick to throw these fellows off the track."

"I had to think quickly, for already they were on the stairs. I knew from their actions that the lower part of the house was sufficiently guarded, and that they had no fear of my dodging them."

"There were two ways of getting to the top of the house.

"I retreated from the stairs at the front and descended one flight at the rear.

"A party was approaching from the lower floor to head me off. I was neatly trapped.

"On the floor where I then stood, at the rear of the house, was a room which I knew to be occupied by the Swedish cook.

"I had seen her, though she had never seen me, and I knew her to be a tall, stout woman, who spoke only a few words of English.

"A desperate plan came into my mind.

"Any chance was better than surrender, for that meant death.

"I pushed open the door of the cook's room and ran in.

"She was sitting up in bed, having been awakened and alarmed by the noise in the house.

"Her eyes bulged out like saucers when she saw me. It seemed as if they shone in the darkness like a cat's.

"For one second she gazed at me, speechless, and then she set up the most hideous yelling I ever heard.

"As I approached, she buried herself in the bed clothes, and her cries were somewhat muffled in them.

"I grabbed a dress-skirt hanging on the wall, and slipped it over my head, letting it hang loosely from my hips and drag around my feet to conceal my shoes.

"Then I seized the counterpane on the bed and wrenched it out of her hands.

"I wrapped my body and head in this so that nothing was visible but one of my hands.

"All this was done in a second.

"Then, copying the cook's tone, I began to yell so much louder than she had that in sheer despair she ceased.

"Still yelling, I plunged through the door,

and through a group of my enemies, who had just come up on the outside.

"They thought I was the cook.

"In the dim light the imposition 'caught on' splendidly.

"He's in there!" shouted Richards.
"We've got him!"

"And he plunged forward into the room, followed by all the others. I had a clear road down the back stairs.

"In the kitchen, to which they led, were two other men, who had been posted there to guard the rear of the house.

"They heard the cry above, 'We've got him,' and they paid no attention to me, except to laugh.

"While they sprang up the stairs to join in my capture, I went through the back door like a streak, and started across lots for the woods.

"I had scarcely cleared the house, however, when I had reason to know that the trick had been discovered.

"Heads appeared at the windows and voices called, evidently to guards posted around the house:

"Stop him! Don't let anybody pass."

"In another instant I had encountered one of the guards.

"I shot him down.

"By this time I had thrown away the skirt and the spread, which impeded my running.

"I was a plain mark for anybody."

"Several bullets whistled by me. The mob was on my heels.

"Cries arose from every point of the compass. It was evident that I was surrounded.

"I cut down a little alley which led to the

abandoned gas works. Freedom had been lighted by gas before they introduced electricity.

"At this point it became perfectly evident that I was headed off, and that I would be captured before I could run another hundred yards.

"To reach the woods was out of the question.

"Just ahead of me I saw a small round building of corrugated iron.

"It had been occupied by some machinery a few years before, but most of it had been removed, as I discovered later.

"The little building was bullet-proof, and that was certainly an advantage in a spot selected for my last desperate stand.

"I darted through the door, and two bullets hit the iron structure at that very moment.

"I pushed the door to and piled some heavy pieces of iron against it. But I knew that it could not stand.

"It resisted, however, the onslaught of the first of my pursuers.

"The interior of the building was dark; for, though it was now past sunrise, the smoke cloud hung so heavily over the town that there was little light even on the streets.

"I drew my lantern and flashed its rays around.

"In the middle of the building was an iron stairway which led up to a little den at the top.

"It seemed to me that I could hold that stairway for a considerable time.

"I could not be attacked from without, and the only way to get at me would be to climb that stair and face me.

"If the rascals had nerve enough to try that they were harder than I thought them.

"Moreover, I had noticed some small openings in the iron walls at the upper part, which would be convenient to shoot through and keep the gang at bay.

"In the lower story were only two ordinary windows, and they gave my assailants a better chance than I had.

"I ran up the iron stairs just in time to escape the fire of a man who had the sense to go to one of the windows.

"I found myself in a round and bare chamber, like the turret of a warship. The machinery which it had once held had been entirely removed.

"The holes in the wall were spaces through which shafting had run to carry power to a fly-wheel on the outside.

"I looked through one of these openings, which was so favorably situated that I could see the door, which was just about to be battered down.

"From this position of advantage I opened fire with deadly effect.

"The small party of my assailants assembled before the door broke and fled, except the three who had fallen.

"Thus began one of the most terrible experiences that ever fell to my lot.

"I was besieged by overwhelming numbers.

"Only their cowardice held them back from carrying the place by storm.

"I had only a faint hope of holding out till relief came from Chick's force. That might not be till very late in the day, and my stock of cartridges would certainly be exhausted long before that time.

"As these thoughts—not very agreeable,

as you'll admit—ran through my mind the bullets were rattling merrily against the iron walls of my fortress.

"They were shooting in the hope of getting a chance shot through one of the slits in the wall.

"They succeeded in several instances, but I lay low, and the bullets hit the iron four or five feet from the floor.

"Occasionally I ventured to look out at one of the openings and return their fire.

"I did some of the best pistol practice of my life on that occasion, and at last inspired them with a wholesome respect.

"But of course it couldn't last.

"They were in no particular hurry. I was caged safely, and could be starved out, if necessary; yet sooner or later their patience or my ammunition would be exhausted, and then would come the inevitable and fatal onslaught.

"I had had about one hundred cartridges when I began the struggle.

"During the first minutes of the siege I was forced to do considerable firing to keep them back.

"Fifty-five cartridges remained to me when it became evident that an immediate attack was not to be feared.

"For more than two hours after that scarcely a shot was fired on either side.

"It was evident that the leaders were holding a consultation.

"Then came a sudden attack.

"A party of perhaps thirty men suddenly burst out from behind a fence and bore down upon my door.

"It took twenty-two cartridges to repel that

"My door was broken down, and I fired the last ten shots down the stairs.

"If they came again it seemed more than probable that they would get me.

"I was suffering terribly from thirst.

"The heat in that iron box was awful.

"It was a hot day, and the smoke which rolled through the town from the burning woods to the south of us parched my tongue.

"I was beginning to feel very low in my mind, as the Yankees say.

"Suddenly there was another attack.

"It came from a side where there was no loop-hole. I had wondered that the besiegers did not discover this fact.

"I could hear them swarming up around the house.

"There was very little chance to shoot at them, but I used a dozen of my cartridges on the fringes of the crowd with good effect.

"They were beating upon the wall with sledges. They broke it in.

"A mob of them burst into the lower room.

"I fired upon them till I was obliged to reload, but so dense was the pistol smoke that many shots were wasted.

"The last cartridges were in my revolvers.

"They drew my fire by various devices till only three bullets remained.

"I had done little execution.

"Suddenly a party of men burst in through the gap in the wall.

"The foremost carried something in his hand, the nature of which I was not slow to guess. It was an explosive bomb.

"They were going to blow me up.

"I remember wondering that they had not done it before.

"I fired at the man with the bomb, but only grazed him. A second shot brought him down.

"His companions dragged him back.

"Then one of them sprang forward to light the bomb.

"I had but one cartridge remaining.

"As I raised my pistol to fire the last shot a tremendous chorus of yells arose without.

"What had happened I could not guess.

"The cries indicated terror and dismay.

"Had Chick come to my rescue?

"It seemed impossible that he could have brought a sufficient force.

"But whatever was the alarm it was effective.

"The crowd bore back.

"The man with the bomb, seeing himself deserted, fled.

"But he had lit the fuse.

"I dropped through the opening in the floor without waiting for the stairs, and rushed out of the building.

"It was possible that I could have extinguished the fuse, but I did not stop for it.

"I ran almost blindly for twenty yards.

"Then the bomb exploded and tore the little fortress which had sheltered me so well to pieces.

"The explosion threw me to the ground, but I was not much hurt.

"When I got upon my feet there was not one of my late assailants in sight.

"But directly before me was the explanation of their panic.

"The whole southern side of the town was in flames!"

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE WOODS.

"In order to understand what had happened, it is necessary to trace the movements of Chick and his party.

"They ran up the track in their car to the appointed place, and then waited for the escaping prisoners.

"It was more than an hour before they appeared.

"The party numbered ten, just twice Chick's force, and all of them were armed.

"No sooner had they seen the engine and car when a brilliant scheme occurred to them.

"It would be a fine thing to drive off the three supposed Italian laborers and force the engineer and fireman to run a passenger train with Ash and his pals for passengers.

"They made a rush for the car.

"Chick and his men met them with a well-directed fire.

"That was all that Ash wanted.

"Just one volley was enough for him. He had discovered that the crew of that little train could take care of itself.

"He turned and fled into the woods at the head of his party.

"The engine and car had been run on a siding, and it was safe to abandon it there, without fear of causing a disaster on the rail.

"Chick and his force immediately started in pursuit of Ash, whose party, by this ill-judged attack, had been reduced to seven.

"Then came a running fight in the woods, Indian fashion.

"For two miles it was kept up, without much damage on either side, for the trees prevented effective marksmanship.

"One of the St. Paul men was slightly

wounded, and one of Ash's party sustained an injury which seemed to be more serious, though it did not stop the man.

"At last Ash came to a little clear spot in the woods.

"He tried to avoid it, but Chick's tactics forced him into it.

"This space contained no trees, but about two-thirds of it was covered with dry grass, which stood as much as four feet high.

"On the further side was a piece of bare ground.

"'If we can drive them on to that,' said Chick to Patsy, 'they're gone.'

"Ash and his men had sought shelter in the grass, and were trying to creep through it without betraying their exact whereabouts.

"They showed great skill, but the waving tops of the blades of grass revealed their movements from time to time, and well-directed bullets headed them off whenever they tried to make way to the right or left, where the woods could again have afforded them shelter.

"In this way they were gradually forced toward the little piece of bare ground, while Chick's men remained on the edge of the clearing and shot from under cover.

"At last the pursued adopted waiting tactics.

"They lay perfectly still in the grass, and it was impossible from Chick's position to tell where they were.

"They evidently meant to lie there all day and escape under cover of the darkness of the next night.

"But Chick is a man of too many resources to permit such a game as that to be played.

"He sent the nimble Patsy into the top of of the tall pine trees."

"From this lofty perch the lad could look down upon the little clearing and spot every one of the hiding rascals.

"He carried a little rifle across his back, and when he reached a convenient place in the tree he opened fire.

"Ash and his men had only revolvers with which to reply, and they could not hit Patsy at that distance.

"Moreover, every time a man fired he revealed his position to Chick's force on the ground.

"Ash was driven to desperation.

"He knew that to get out upon the open space was to invite destruction.

"A fiendish idea, borrowed from the most dreadful Indian warfare, entered his mind.

"With a cry of warning to his men, he struck a match upon the stock of his revolver and fired the grass.

"It was dry as tinder. The wind blew straight toward Chick's party.

"In a single second, as it seemed to Chick, an avalanche of flame was rushing down upon him.

"Patsy had seen the danger first,

"He had uttered one warning shout, and then had begun to scramble for his life, out of the top of the tree.

"The flames had reached the foot of it when he leaped down.

"The three men from St. Paul had obeyed an order from Chick and were running desperately to the right, in an attempt to get around the fire.

"Chick waited for Patsy.

"The instant the lad's feet touched the ground, he started on the run.

"It was a close call, and the danger followed them at every step.

"Chick tells me that if there had not been a swale of young green timber ahead of them they would have been lost.

"But this growth with a swampy foundation held the flames back, and enabled the runners to win the day.

"Keeping in the low swale, they ran along, and at last felt themselves safe.

"Chick and Patsy had quickly overtaken the others, and, with the fire roaring behind them, they pressed on in pursuit of Ash and his gang.

"I hear them," suddenly whispered Patsy. "They're ahead of us and to the left."

"As he spoke, they came out into more open timber.

"Before them they could see men running.

"That's the gang," said Chick. "But I don't understand their actions. They're running for their lives."

"There's another thing I don't understand," replied Patsy, "and that is why there's so much smoke here. And that roaring sound!"

"By Heavens, Patsy;" cried Chick. "It's another fire."

"Have they started it?"

"No. My lad, it's an off-shoot from the great forest fires that are sweeping over this whole region."

"We're lost!" cried one of the St. Paul men, in panicy terror.

"It looks blue, I'll admit," said Chick, "but 'never say die' is my motto. Let's push ahead. If we can only find a running stream

—and if I remember my little map, there's one hereabouts—we stand a chance to be safe.'

"Let's follow the low ground," said Pasty.

"They ran for their lives.

"The smoke nearly stifled them. The heat became dreadful.

"Burning twigs were borne upon the wind, and new fires sprang up.

"They seemed to be surrounded.

"Chick and Patsy were obliged to put heart into the others by every possible encouragement.

"The three men were so exhausted, and so nearly smothered by the smoke, that they would have lain down and given up the struggle.

"But to stop meant to perish, and Chick and Patsy fairly dragged their companions along.

"And in this wilderness of fire, pursuers and pursued suddenly met.

"Ash's force had dwindled to five. The numbers were equal.

"But nobody thought of battle.

"The fire overpowered every other peril.

"Come on or die!" cried Ash to his men, just as Chick and Patsy burst through the underbrush and confronted them.

"Not that way!" Chick exclaimed, as he saw Ash's men suddenly plunge off to the left. "Good God, men! you are running directly into the fire!"

"They did not heed him.

"Mad with terror, they ran directly into a stretch of dry, dead timber, which, while the others looked, burst into a light of flame.

"They're gone!" screamed Ash, and darted off in the contrary direction.

"Though deformed and limping, he made tremendous speed.

"He knows the way better than we do. Let's follow him!" cried Chick.

"They darted down the hollow in a last effort for life.

"Chick was ahead. In two minutes more his voice was heard crying:

"This way. A stream! a stream!"

CHAPTER IX.

A TOWN WIPE-D OUT.

"When I saw the flames bursting from the roofs of so many houses, I knew that the forest fires had swept down upon the town.

"In reality, as was afterward evident, it was the fire started by Ash which had invaded Freedom.

"It is a strange freak of fate that the act which that miscreant committed with the purpose of destroying the forces of law and justice should have been the means of saving the man who had sworn to bring punishment upon him for his crimes.

"But so it was. The fire had not reached Freedom any too soon for me.

"If it had not appalled my assailants in the very moment of victory, my life would have paid the forfeit.

"But now all thought of that was forgotten.

"They had no time to wreak vengeance upon me.

"The hand of fate was already clutching them. The hot breath of destruction blew in their faces.

"With a common impulse, the whole town rushed in one direction.

"I fell in with the tide of frightened people.

"Already the heat was something dreadful. What would it be later?

"The flames had not actually reached the edge of the forest which hemmed in the town.

"It was the shower of burning twigs borne by the gale which had fired the houses of the town.

"When Freedom should be surrounded by a ring of blazing forest, its wretched inhabitants would be roasted, incinerated, in a dreadful furnace."

"For myself, I gave up hope when I saw the smoke cloud bearing down upon us, laden with flaming brands that kindled new fires where they fell."

"I had little idea of why I was running, except that it was away from the fire. But that was no real reason, for I could not hope to outstrip this terrible pursuer."

"The throng of people gathered at the railroad station.

"I learned from inquiries that they hoped a train might appear to carry them away. It seems that a train was due at that hour."

"For myself, I could have laughed at that vain hope but for the deadly pathos of it."

"There was about as much chance of a train arriving as there was of a great air-ship swooping down from the skies."

"And yet a train did come."

"Never shall I forget the spectacle as it rolled into that doomed town."

"It consisted of an engine and two cars, and it had come from a town above, eight miles beyond Freedom."

"When it rolled into the station the tops of the cars were actually smoking with the heat."

"The first persons who sprang down from the train were Chick and Patsy."

"I was overjoyed. I had thought them surely lost in the burning woods."

"One of the St. Paul men was with them."

"The other two had been too much exhausted to come."

"In order to explain the presence of Chick and Patsy I must tell you what, of course, I did not learn from them then."

"They had floated down the narrow, deep and rapid stream to which they had been so providentially led."

"It had taken them, in less than a quarter of an hour, to the town where they had found the train."

"The engineer and fireman had resolved to run the train back along the track, but Chick and Patsy had persuaded them to push on to Freedom and attempt to mitigate the horrors of its doom."

"All this I learned later."

"The first words Chick said when he leaped down from the train were:

"'The women and children first!'

"I echoed the cry, and it was taken up by the boldest of the men."

"I don't know whether I and my men were recognized by the criminal coterie of Freedom in that moment."

"At any rate, all animosity was forgotten. Every brave man there looked for death to wipe out all scores within a few minutes. The others were too frightened to know the difference between one man and another."

"'The women and children first!' we cried, and attempted to stem the rush which was already being made for the cars."

"With the help of some of the bravest of the desperate villains in Freedom, we succeeded."

"Yes; with the aid of men, every one of whom was a criminal, we forced the virtue of self-sacrifice upon the cowards."

"Only women and children were permitted to board the train."

"There were wild screams and farewells as pathetic as if they had not been addressed to men stained with crime."

"Devoted women refused to leave the men they loved, and were forcibly compelled to do so by the men themselves, who, the next moment, fell back into the ranks of those condemned to die."

"'Hurry! hurry!' screamed the engineer. 'The depot is burning over my head.'

"It was true. The wooden roof of the train shed had taken fire."

"The heat was deadly. Many women were put aboard the cars fainting.

"Beside the track at one place was a great sluggish pool, almost large enough to be called a pond.

"It had been caused by the bursting of a water-pipe which fed the great tank at the station.

"In this pool men wallowed, trying to escape the heat which beat so fiercely upon them.

"Just back of the pool was a long wooden building, used as store-house.

"When that should take fire I felt that our doom would be sealed.

"We should be forced out of our position, and to what spot could we flee?

"Hurry there! We must start."

The train was boarded. The two cars, with desperate crowding, barely held the women and children.

"The platforms were occupied by dozens.

"Such a scene I never witnessed. I have been on a sinking ship and seen the women put into the boats, but the horror did not match this. I think nothing but a fire at sea could do it.

The engineer waved his hand.

"I must start!" he yelled. "The woods will be blazing back there if I wait another minute."

"I was about to say, 'Start your wheels!', when suddenly Jed Ash started up before me, a ghastly figure, blackened and singed.

"How he got there is more than I have ever been able to discover, but I judge he must have followed a different branch of that stream, and have been taken toward Freedom."

"Hold on!" he cried, waving a pistol. "Don't you dare to leave me here to burn!"

"He was frenzied with fear.

"He hurled his great bulk toward the rear platform of the train, which was crowded with women.

"As he passed me, I struck the pistol from his hand.

"He paid no attention to me, but pressed on to the platform, crying out:

"'Fools! Will you stay there and burn?'

"His words started a deadly panic.

"Cowards were inspired with more desperate cowardice.

"A second and far stronger rush was made for the train.

"Chick and Patsy, beside the last car, menaced the crowd with revolvers, and even fired into it.

"Meanwhile Ash had seized hold of two women upon the rear platform, and was endeavoring to drag them down to make room for himself.

"Shrieks rent the air. There was horror piled upon horror.

"The act of Ash—the most despicable that I have ever seen—maddened me.

"I sprang upon the fellow, and seizing him by the throat, I hurled him back.

"At that moment the engineer started the train.

"Ash leaped up from the ground and made another mad rush for the train.

"He broke from my grasp; he plunged forward.

"For a fraction of a second his hand was on the rail of the platform. Then he pitched forward and fell under the wheels.

"They passed over him, and he died.

"And that is why I have failed in my purpose of bringing him back to meet his fate under the shadow of the law."

CHAPTER X.

THE TREASURE-HOUSE.

"The train rolled away, and as it vanished a feeble cheer went up from the bravest of the men.

"The next moment despair reigned supreme.

"I walked up to Chick and looked into his face, which was contorted with the agony of the heat."

"He waved his hand. I followed the direction of his movement."

"The great store-house had taken fire."

"I took one of his hands and one of Patsy's."

"The time has come," said I. "It has come to all of us at once."

"Both of them were perfectly calm. I should have expected it of Chick, but Patsy, after all, is only a boy, and a death by fire is hard for the bravest man to face."

"I suppose there's no use taking a run down the track," said Chick, pointing in the direction in which the train had gone.

"Not a bit," I replied. "A train making sixty miles an hour may get through that belt of burning woods, but we can't."

"If we could only get up to where we left our engine and car."

"The car's a cinder by this time," said Patsy, and true to his national character, he added, with a laugh, "and so am I."

"You're right about the car, my boy," said Chick. "But as for you, you're cool. I'm proud of you."

"Is that dead straight! Am I doing it pretty well?" asked the boy. "It's good of you to say so, Chick; it is, for a fact."

"So we stood waiting the inevitable, when suddenly I was aware of the presence of Foley, district attorney of a county of fire and smoke."

"Do you want to save her?" he gasped.

"You mean Mrs. Richards?" I exclaimed. "Where is she?"

"Under lock and key in our treasure-vault."

"What sort of a vault?"

"It is an underground chamber, near the prison."

"Not under its walls?"

"No."

"Thank heaven for that. Your prison is of stone, but it will crumble to dust before this fire has fairly passed over the town."

"This vault, then, is the cellar of some building—"

"No; it is in an open space. The entrance is under the fountain in the square; at least, that is one entrance. There is another by a tunnel."

"Do you mean to tell me," I yelled, "that there's an underground chamber in this town with no house to burn over it, and you're not in it? Why, man, there's safety there!"

"Safety?"

"He was actually too badly rattled to grasp the idea."

"And let me say here, as the most extraordinary thing that ever I encountered, that of the fifty men in that town who knew the secret of that treasure-chamber, not one had thought of it as a place of refuge."

"Yes, of course," I shouted. "So long as it has no combustible matter over it, we can outlive this fire there, if we can ever get to it. Come, and call all those who will follow."

"My voice was drowned in an awful roar."

"The flames which had been toying with the great store-house took a sudden vigorous hold upon it."

"It roared to heaven in one great wave of fire."

"What happened then I scarcely know. I have an indistinct memory of seeing the crowd before me wither and fall dead."

"Then I remember running, with one of Foley's hands clasped tightly, so that I could drag him along while I shouted, with parched lips, to Chick, Patsy, and the St. Paul officer."

"I don't see how it was possible for us to reach the square through that heat, but we did it."

"Foley showed us where the entrance to the treasure-chamber was."

"It was a spacious room under ground, but not deep enough to keep out the heat of that conflagration. It was like an oven when we entered it.

"There were Richards and his wife, prisoners. Their guard had fled, but they had not discovered it.

"I was surprised to find Richards a prisoner, but the whole story was afterward told me.

"He turned against his pals at last, at the question of my murder, and was desperate to prevent it.

"They were afraid of him. They thought he might even go so far as to work some trick for summoning aid from another town.

"So they put him, with his wife, under guard.

"She was sitting on a pile of rich silks as I entered. They were, I do not doubt, relics of some raid by members of the gang.

"Her husband's head lay in her lap, and I saw at a glance that the end was near for him.

"His heart had failed him in a double sense.

"I did all I could for him, as we waited there through that afternoon, while theraging wind piled firebrands over us, and we gasped for breath.

"He died just before the fire had passed over and the heat had abated so that we could leave our refuge.

"The grief of this really noble woman touched me deeply. I consoled her as far as I was able with the promise that I would guard her husband's real name forever from exposure in connection with this affair.

"She will be provided for financially, and will keep her secret in some far-off place.

"In conclusion, let me say that the train-load of women and children passed safely through the burning woods; but of the men who remained behind, not one—outside of

my party and James Foley—escaped the flames and the scorching heat.

"The spectacle which that town presented when we were able to come forth and view it was something which beggars description.

"I will not offend you by unnecessarily describing its horrors. The dead numbered over four hundred.

"In the course of the next day a relief train came up the road and saved us from starvation.

"And so, with the exception of Foley, I brought back no prisoners.

"The whole nest of vipers was utterly wiped out.

"My report on what Freedom was has been long. My report on what it is now can be put in one word. It is nothing."

[THE END.]

The next number will contain "The Beautiful Shop-Lifter; or, Nick Carter's Search for An Old Offender."

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"Well, I say that the very best of men don't know the difference between their souls and their stomachs, and they fancy that they are a-wrestling with their doubts when really it is their dinners they're a-wrestling with.

"Take my old man. A kinder husband never drew breath; yet so sure as he touches a bit of pork he begins to worry hisself about the doctrine of Election, till I say, 'I'd be ashamed to go troubling the minister with my doubts when an Ayer's Pill would set things straight again.' "

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